

BACHELOR-THESIS SUMMARY

EL POTENCIAL DEL ECOTURISMO EN COLOMBIA

By Stefan Widmer

When it comes to tourism in Colombia, opinions diverge. Swiss travel agencies generally put Colombia on the black list of destinations which are considered to be too risky to go to. Also, the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs wants tourists who go to Colombia to be careful and warns them from kidnapping, crimes and illegally armed groups like the FARC. This information leads to the fact that people in Switzerland have a very bad image about Colombia as a touristic destination. On the contrary, tourists who have already travelled in Colombia are fascinated overall by its nature. These tourists have a better image of Colombia. And they have good arguments. Colombia belongs to the four countries with the highest biodiversity in the world and possesses 53 protected natural areas.

This thesis aims to contrast the two points of view and to determine the ecotouristic potential of Colombia. The first part of the thesis is about theoretical concepts of ecotourism. In a second part, the aim is to study the case of the Colombian „Tayrona National Park“ in the north of Colombia. Finally, the aim is to develop a marketing tool for a Swiss travel agency which is specialized in South American tourism.

The first chapter starts with theoretical concepts towards tourism in general. The definition of the term „tourism“, the history of tourism and the trends towards sustainable tourism are of high interest. Based on these trends, ecotourism consists of the three key elements nature, education and sustainability. Depending on the degree to which these criteria are fulfilled, tourism can be considered as soft or hardcore ecotourism. As ecotourism is often put on a level with cultural tourism, adventure tourism or 3S (sea, sand and sun) tourism, ecotourism will be distinguished from those types of tourism. Nevertheless, the different forms of tourism overlap to a certain degree. The first chapter finishes with the description of the main stakeholders of an ecotouristic system, namely the tourists, local people, touristic industry, the public sector and NGO's.

The second chapter investigates the factor destination image from a theoretical point of view. First sources concerning stereotypes of touristic destinations go back to the year 1824 and were in fact comic books for children in which the author described the journey of a main character through Europe giving the different nationalities and countries a distinct image. Actual and scientific literature define nine dimensions of destination images and gives them an important role in a decision making process of a tourist.

Based on the importance of the prior chapter, chapter three treats the question on how a destination or a national park in particular can work on its image in order to improve its participation in the ecotouristic sector. One well established approach therefore is to determine the main touristic attractions, to target the main potential consumers and to perform effective promotional acts.

Based on the first chapter, chapter four focusses on the ecotouristic offer of Colombia. A general overview concerning incoming tourism shows that Colombia had the highest growth rate in South America in 2006. In a further step, the Tayrona National Park, as one of 53 protected areas, is subject of a practical investigation. The park offers four main ecotouristic attractions, namely the unique sandy beaches, the bird diversity, the diverse vegetation and the archaeological place of interest called „Pueblito“. Tourists who come to the Tayrona park have different possibilities of accommodation and activities in the area. They can either sleep in a modern hotel, in tents or even in a hammock. Depending on the arrangement of tourist preferences and their behavior, one can distinguish between soft and hardcore ecotourism. To give some examples for different types of ecotourism, this chapter examines three ecotouristic packets, namely the modern „Ecohabs“, the standardized huts called „Posadas“ and the authentic ranch „Don Pedro“. Compared to the theory from chapter one, the three ecotouristic packets are positioned in an ecotouristic map.

The following chapter considers the existing image that potential Swiss tourists have of Colombia. On the one hand, it is of high interest what experienced tourist, who have already travelled through Colombia, associate with the country and on the other hand, the chapter tries to describe what image unexperienced tourists form. While experienced tourists are predominantly fascinated by their holidays in Colombia and mention over again the beautiful nature and the cordiality of the Colombian people, unexperienced tourists are worried about the security in Colombia. As security is a must criterion for successful tourism, this topic must be investigated more intensively. Qualitative interviews with the tourism police of

Santa Marta and an expert concerning security in Colombian national parks build the base for a security map of the Colombian national parks. Basically, it can be said that national parks in the north are not in danger of illegal armed groups like the FARC or the Paramilitary organisation. Nevertheless, there are some hot spots that are geopolitically explosive and where tourism is not recommended.

Based on chapter three, chapter six develops a marketing tool that can be positioned in the Swiss tourism market in order to influence the image of Colombia in a positive way. In cooperation with a Swiss travel agency, a promotional movie of 15 minutes shows the beauty of the Tayrona National Park. The movie is combined with a proposed paragraph for the homepage of the company and for the newsletter that appears monthly¹.

Finally, chapter seven draws as a conclusion that Colombia, represented by the Tayrona National Park in the Colombian Caribbean, has an enormous ecotouristic potential. In addition to that, it is the Colombian people who make a touristic stay perfect. The fact that the beach „Arrecifes“ in Tayrona National Park is supposed to be the number two of the most beautiful beaches in the world or the fact that Colombian people occupy the second rank in the *Happy Planet Index* support this perspective. On the other hand Colombia still suffers from warlike situations and tourists have to be conscious of where they are going to travel and with whom. The developed marketing tool should not deny this condition but it is an instrument to show the other face of Colombia in order to improve the unjustly low image of Colombia .

¹ The paragraph is now available under: <http://www.dorado-latintours.ch/dorado/suedamerika/kolumbien/tipps/>